OVERVIEW
5-2

Management Board of Cabinet

OPS Management Series

Accountability

Introduction

It is a requirement of responsible government that public service managers be held accountable for their management of public resources. The Ontario Government clearly recognizes this fact in its statement of Management Philosophy. Accountability is identified as one of three basic characteristics of the management process. It is also closely related to the other two components, achieving results and decentralization of decision-making (discussed in other publications in this series).

All public service managers assume with their jobs and assigned tasks a contract of accountability. They may not always be certain, however, of what they are accountable for, to whom they are accountable, and the need for accountability in the public service management setting.

This publication addresses these questions. As well, it defines the concept of accountability, as a necessary feature of the manager's job, in relation to other characteristics of the management process, and in the context of the management cycle.

What Is Accountability?

Accountability can be defined as the obligation of managers to be answerable for fulfilling responsibilities that flow from the authority given them. It means that managers must explain their decisions and actions and the consequences thereof.

Accountability flows both upwards and downwards in the management hierarchy. Managers are accountable to their superiors and in turn their subordinates are accountable to them. Accountability thus constitutes a shared obligation for fulfillment of responsibilities which links all participants in the management process. In the public service context, accountability also flows outwards from managers to the public they serve. These two forms of accountability are described in the Management Philosophy as internal and external respectively.

Internal accountability holds managers answerable to their line superiors for their own actions and the actions of their subordinates. The latter obligation arises from the act of delegation (described briefly later in this document and in more detail in a separate publication). Internal accountability involves reporting and clarifying of facts, events, and decisions, and goes beyond this point to include justification and the frank disclosure of error.

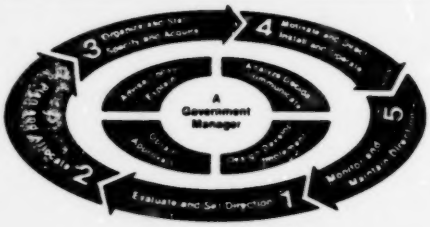
External accountability holds government managers answerable to the public as well. The normal channel through which this requirement is satisfied is the minister, who reports on the actions of his staff to various officials and bodies — notably, the Provincial Auditor, the Legislature and its committees (including, particularly, the Public Accounts Committee), the media, and public interest groups. In support of the minister's reporting role, managers may be called upon to clarify or explain their administrative decisions and actions.

Accountability in the Management Process

Accountability supports and is supported by the other two characteristics of the management process, achieving results and decentralization of decision-making.

The focus on achieving results has been formalized in the management approach adopted for the Ontario Public Service — Managing By Results (MBR). MBR relies on accountability as a motivating force for public service managers and as a control mechanism for the appropriate management of public resources. In order for managers to be held accountable, their responsibilities must be thoroughly and unambiguously defined. MBR defines accountability in terms of achieving results through the efficient use of resources. This definition provides managers with a clear operating framework and establishes from the outset how their performance will be assessed. Herein lies the motivating factor. Accountability allows managers considerable freedom in fulfilling their assigned responsibilities, and by relating performance measurement to results, it enhances the likelihood that agreed objectives will be attained. MBR also provides the means for holding managers accountable, by requiring measurement and reporting of resources employed and results achieved.

Accountability supports the concept of decentralized decision-making, or delegation, by again providing a mechanism to maintain control over the management of public resources. Responsible government requires that any sharing of managerial responsibilities be accompanied by adequate control. Without accountability, full delegation would not be possible in the public service environment. Decentralized decision-making, as practised in the Ontario Government, in turn reinforces accountability by requiring that managers answer to those who have delegated their responsibilities to them.



Management Cycle

Accountability in the Management Cycle

Accountability permeates all phases of the management cycle. Every decision and act must be guided by recognition of the fact that the manager is dealing with public resources and is therefore answerable for his employment of them.

Although accountability is constantly present in the sequence of management functions, there are stages in the cycle when it becomes a predominant factor in decision-making. These stages are steps 1, 2 and 5 of the management cycle. In Step 1, the manager "evaluates and sets direction," re-affirming the role, mandate, and direction of the program. In Step 2, the manager "plans and allocates," making crucial decisions about the use of resources, preparing budget estimates and a defence of planned expenditures, and determining the performance indicators by which results will be judged. In Step 5, the manager again focuses on accountability in "monitoring and maintaining direction" towards the attainment of program objectives. These planning and control functions serve to remind managers that they are expected to account for their management decisions.

What Managers Are Accountable For

In general, managers are accountable for their own work and the work of their subordinates in implementing and administering legislation and programs. They are accountable for efficiently managing human, financial and physical resources, as well as for achieving results. In addition, they are accountable for the quality of advice that they give to their superiors and the alternative courses of action that they recommend.

Managers are accountable only for those functions that fall within their sphere of responsibility. The range of accountability is limited to the manager's freedom to act and to delegate action. A line manager is responsible and accountable for his own actions and the actions of his subordinates, but not for those of his superiors.

Accountability for policy is vested in the ministers of the Crown; therefore, it falls outside the sphere of managerial responsibility. Public service managers are, however, accountable for the quality of their advice and the implementation of approved policy. They may also be called upon to explain or clarify aspects of such policy, but they are not required to justify its adoption or the priority assigned to its implementation.

Accountability and responsibility go hand in hand. Determining what a manager is accountable for is essentially the same as defining his responsibilities. As one proceeds upwards in the management hierarchy, the scope of a manager's responsibilities increases, but the requirement of accountability remains constant at all levels. The lowest manager in the hierarchy is as accountable for his actions as the most senior ministry executive.

How Managers Are Held Accountable

The Ontario Government employs various methods for upholding the accountability of public service managers. Included in these methods are management reporting processes, performance appraisals and program reviews. The results abstracts developed through the MBR management approach also have become an important tool for maintaining accountability.

There are several necessary conditions for the maintenance of accountability in the public service. These include the following:

- Authority and responsibility must be delegated.
- Plans, objectives and guidelines must be clearly defined.
- Adequate information and reporting systems must be in place.
- Managers must define the results that they are working to achieve. These defined results must be agreed upon by superiors and accepted by managers with responsibility for implementing the program.
- Suitable mechanisms must be in place for measuring and evaluating managerial performance.

Accountability in the 1980s

Accountability in the public service has become increasingly important in recent years, and its predominance will likely continue through the 1980s and beyond. The present focus on accountability arises from developments both outside and within government.

The public demand for improved government services has grown steadily since the 1960s. At the same time, government has been called upon to reduce the level of its spending. In the course of reconciling these goals, the Ontario Government has urged its managers to demonstrate increased efficiency in the achievement of results — in effect, to produce more at less cost.

Pressure for increased control of government spending has come from government auditors as well. The Provincial Auditor now has the mandate to report on the economy and efficiency of government expenditures, as well as the adequacy of systems to measure program effectiveness. The scope of internal audit in each ministry has been expanded as well. This audit process includes management controls in addition to the traditional financial audit.

Government generally is becoming subject to closer public scrutiny than it has been in the past. To an increasing degree, the public seeks detailed information about government programs, not only in respect of expenditure commitments, but also concerning administrative decisions.

Finally, within the Ontario Public Service, the adoption of Managing By Results has placed a strong emphasis on managerial accountability. It is the key factor that makes this approach workable for managers at all levels.

Meaningful accountability benefits all parties — managers, elected representatives, and the public. It will continue to be a prime requirement of effective government in Ontario.

Queen's Printer, Toronto 1982
ISSN 0-710-7986